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HOUSE DEMOCRATS VOTE TO REJECT REPUBLICAN CUTS TO JOBLESS BENEFITS

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – Florida House Democratic Caucus members voted unanimously in opposition today to a Republican measure that slashes benefits to the unemployed and restricts eligibility for jobless benefits.

The legislation arises amid a nearly 12 percent statewide unemployment rate and despite findings that Florida has some of the lowest benefits and poorest participation in unemployment compensation in the nation. Only about 400,000 currently qualify for benefits because the standard to qualify for benefits excludes many short-term and seasonal workers.

The bill reduces the duration of state unemployment benefits from 26 to 20 weeks, and maintains the current maximum payment of \$275- a-week. The plan also ties benefits to the state's unemployment rate. Along with reducing benefits, the measure also adds new authority for employers to challenge a laid-off worker's claim, while making the jobless undergo a "skills review" and show proof they are actively seeking work.

Numerous Democratic Caucus members spoke in opposition and some have issued statements of concern about House Bill 7005. Here are some of their remarks:

Rep. Scott Randolph, D-Orlando, said: "Not only will this bill not create jobs, it will destroy jobs. The average small business – the true job creators – would barely see a nudge in unemployment taxes. On the other hand, big out-of-state corporations, many of which have handed out bonuses to millionaire CEOs and are hoarding billions in cash, will be able to shift costs to the state of Florida while enriching their shareholders and their CEOs in New York."

Rep. Luis Garcia, D-Miami, said: "I think this is pretty much what former President George Bush called voodoo economics. If we are going to pass the savings to merchants, let's do it in a more direct way."

Rep. Geraldine Thompson, D-Orlando, said: “This bill penalizes those who are unemployed through no fault of their own and among those who need us most. The unemployed among us are the victims of the recession, not the cause of it. This bill would indicate that this (House) is more concerned about multi-national corporations and other businesses at the expense of workers who contribute to the profits that businesses enjoy.”

Rep. Darren Soto, D-Orlando, said: “I believe this bill will increase our Medicaid and food stamp costs. If this legislation fails to start a job-sonic boom, then we ultimately give a windfall to businesses at the expense of federal and state taxpayers.”

Rep. Perry Thurston, D-Plantation, said: “Why has this bill been classified as mean spirited? First of all, we all know that the real path to solving Florida’s unemployment compensation issues is to set realistic rates and realistic payments.”

Rep. Alan Williams, D-Tallahassee, said: “Democrats are pro-business. But Democrats are also pro-people...Keeping the benefits at 26 weeks is vital to helping those who have been hardest hit by this recession.”

Rep. Daphne Campbell, D-Miami, said: “At this time, with an unemployment rate of nearly 12 percent, why would we want to make it harder for unemployed Floridians to survive?”

Rep. Mark Pafford, D-West Palm Beach, issued this statement: “Once again with this bill, Florida isn’t presenting a friendly face to the unemployed. We are balancing the burdens of Walls Street excesses on the backs of middle-class Floridians and others who are unemployed due to no fault of their own.”

Rep. Janet Cruz, D-Tampa, issued this statement: “We already have an unemployment compensation system that suffers with low participation and insufficient benefits. Now we’re making it even less generous to Floridians.”

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